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Class E360

Book G345

REPORT

of the Committee on Naval Affairs, on the petition of Captain Samuel C. Reid, accompanied with a bill authorizing a sum of money to distributed among the officers and crew of the late private armed brig the General Armstrong.

MARCH 4, 1818.

Read, and with the Bill committed to a committee of the whole House on Monday next.

The Committee on Naval affairs, to whom was referred the petition of Samuel C. Reid, captain of the late private armed brig the General Armstrong, on behalf of himself, the officers and crew of the said brig,

REPORT:

It appears from the petition, and other documents, that the circumstances which gave rise to the application, were in substance the following:—Captain Reid in the private armed brig the General Armstrong, of seven guns and ninety men, left the port of New York on a cruise, early in September 1814; on the 26th of the same month they came to anchor in the port of Fayal, one of the Azores or Western Islands, belonging to the crown of Portugal; in the evening of the same day, a British squadron consisting of the Plantagenet of 74, the Rota of 44, and the Carnation of 18 guns, under the command of captain Lloyd, anchored in the same port; during the night, which was entirely clear, the moon near or at the full and shining brightly, which enabled the Americans to examine accurately, and observe distinctly the movements of the enemy; four boats full of armed men were observed to be approaching the Armstrong, from the smallest of their vessels which lay near; Captain Reid hailed them repeatedly to know what were their views; no answer being returned, and the boats continuing to approach, orders were given to fire upon them, which were instantly obeyed with destructive effect, and after a short contest the boats retreated to their ships. It was soon discovered that the enemy were making preparations to renew the attack, which was commenced about midnight, with twelve or fourteen boats, containing as was supposed about 400 men completely armed and prepared. After a most obstinate, and on the part of the enemy bloody

contest, which lasted about forty minutes, they were entirely frustrated in their attempts to carry the brig, and again retreated to their ships. In this second contest several of the enemy's boats were destroyed, and two of them taken possession of by the crew of the Armstrong, literally filled with dead. After the second retreat of the enemy, the greatest exertions were used by the Americans to prepare their vessel for action in case of another attack. About this time, capt. Reid received a note from Mr. Dabney the American consul, requesting to see him on shore; when he repaired thither, the consul informed him that the Portuguese governor had addressed a note to the commander of the British squadron, protesting against his violating the neutrality of the port, and requiring him to cease from further outrage on those whom it was his duty to protect. To this note captain Lloyd returned a menacing reply, that he would take the Armstrong at every hazard, and if she was injured by her crew, he would consider the place as an enemy's port, and treat it accordingly. During the last action with the boats, the Armstrong lay within pistol shot of the castle. Captain Reid then returned on board his vessel, and about day-break a cannonade was commenced from one of the enemy's vessels on the Armstrong. Thus situated, finding the enemy determined to persevere in their outrage, and from the immense superiority of their force, knowing it would be impossible to save his vessel, captain Reid having due regard for the safety of his comrades who had so nobly supported him, determined to scuttle her and leave her; this he did, when she was immediately set on fire by the enemy and destroyed. In these several contests, from good information, there is reason to believe the loss of the enemy, at a moderate calculation, amounted at least to 250 men in killed and wounded; that of the Americans was two killed and seven wounded. The petition further states, that this British squadron was on its way to the West Indies to join the force destined to make an attack on New Orleans; that in consequence of the injury which they sustained, their junction was so much retarded, and the expedition so much delayed, that the Americans had time to prepare for the defence of that place, which, but for this circumstance, could probably not have been effected. The petition concludes with a prayer that Congress would bestow something on those who so gallantly defended the American flag, under circumstances so hopeless; and who in the contest lost nearly the whole of their little all.

This case has engaged much of the attention of the committee. They do not believe that the annals of our government furnish a precedent of rewards bestowed on men situated as were the crew of the Armstrong, not in the public service. They are fully aware also of the weight attached, and justly attached to precedents which have been settled on due consideration; it would, therefore, be with much reluctance they would consent to establish one, to which an appeal might be made in future cases, somewhat analagous in principle. But on mature reflection, apprehensions from the precedent which

may be established by this case, are much diminished. It will not be going too far, in the opinion of the committee, to say, that among all the achievements which embellish the annals of the late war, there was not one which surpassed that now under consideration. A few brave men in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, who had no personal interest in the preservation of the vessel they defended, and the mere preservation of which, without a miracle, must have been impracticable, could have been actuated by nothing short of the noblest motives which impel men to the achievement of valiant deeds; those motives could have been only their own honor and the glory of the flag under which they fought. They knew well the high value which was placed by their country on the rising reputation of their infant navy; they knew it was all-important that that reputation should be sustained by Americans in whatever situation they might be placed; and impelled by these generous motives, and these alone, they hazarded every thing to accomplish their object. They succeeded; and though after two complete victories, the second gained under circumstances of the greatest inequality, they were ultimately obliged to yield to a superior force, yet the honor of the flag was supported, and the American character raised to an elevation calculated to produce the most beneficial effects. Should this Congress bestow on these gallant men some mark of their bounty, the committee think it would be well bestowed; and should it have the effect of producing similar exertions in future wars, and this precedent be pleaded in support of similar applications, they do not believe the country will have cause to regret the application of a small sum to a purpose so beneficial. From all the circumstances of the case, the committee recommend to the House, the passage of a bill herewith reported, to divide among the officers and crew of the *Armstrong* the sum of ten thousand dollars.

To the honorable the Congress of the United States, in Senate and House of Representatives convened: The memorial of Samuel C. Reid, late commander of the private armed brig General Armstrong, on behalf of the officers and crew of the said vessel,

RESPECTFULLY SHOWETH:

That on the 26th September 1814, the said vessel being at anchor in the port of Fayal, and having on board a crew of ninety men, and seven guns, was attacked by a superior force under the command of commodore Lloyd, and that the said vessel was finally burnt and destroyed.

For the details of that action, your memorialist refers to the letter of John B. Dabney, Esq. then consul for the United States at Fayal to the Secretary of State, dated 5th October, 1814.

It would not become your memorialist to speak of the merit (if any there was) of the officers and crew of the Armstrong in that action. He may, nevertheless, be allowed to state as a fact, that the squadron with which they engaged, was a part of that armament which was destined to make the descent upon New-Orleans, and that the injury sustained by this squadron in the action above mentioned, delayed for a time its junction with the fleet then in the West Indies, and thus retarded the progress of the expedition, which gave time for the brave Jackson to collect and arrange his forces.

The officers and crew of the Armstrong do not arrogate to themselves any personal merit, by reason of events and consequences which they could not have foreseen. Yet, if by the faithful discharge of their duty as citizens, they have, under Providence, been the instruments in effecting a great public good, they may hope thence to derive a fairer claim to the notice of their government.

Your memorialist on behalf of the said officers and crew, beg leave further to observe, that when they were attacked by a force so vastly superior, and when there was no longer a hope of successful resistance, or of the preservation of the vessel, they would have been justified to the owners, and would perhaps have escaped the reproaches of their fellow citizens if they had abandoned their vessel, and sought only their personal safety. But they owed a duty to their country, and it was this impulse alone that could induce them to make such a resistance at the expense of their lives and property, no other object being in view; and they do hope, therefore, that their case may not be confounded with that of those who may have fought bravely from the mere prospect of gain.

The officers and crew of the Armstrong had not the advantages of being in the immediate employ, nor of enjoying the pay and emoluments of government; yet they have been led to presume that a

service rendered to their country; is not the less meritorious for having been performed without the obligation of *contract*, or previous stipulation for reward.

It may be true that valiant deeds are not to be rewarded with money, yet the practise of our own government, and that of every civilized nation in the old world, testifies their opinion, that sound policy requires, that the citizens or subjects who perform such deeds as attract the notice of government, should not want the means of decent support; and Congress have deigned to bestow, and our naval heroes have not disdained to receive pecuniary reward for services they may have rendered their country in the destruction of men and ships of the enemy.

It is with great reluctance and hesitation, that your memorialist, the said Samuel C. Reid, claims the attention of Congress for himself, he should have been forever silent, but he can no longer resist the importunities of those who were his associates in that action, nor be longer a passive witness to their poverty and distress, some of which feel the smart of their wounds to this day.

The said officers and crew having lost most of their baggage and other necessities, and having also suffered great privations and distress, arrived in the United States about the close of the war, and owing to the embarrassments of commerce and navigation, have been unable by any exertions to procure for themselves and families a bare subsistence; whence, far the greater part of them and their families, are now actually suffering from want.

Your memorialist hath been led to believe, that these facts are unknown to Congress, and that it would not be deemed honorable to the nation or its government, that those whom the journals of Congress have thought proper to eulogize, should exist but in misery and distress in the bosom of their own country.

SAMUEL C. REID.

Copy of a letter from our Consul at Fayal, to the Secretary of State.

FAYAL, 5th October 1814.

SIR,

I have the honor to state to you that a most outrageous violation of the neutrality of this port, in utter contempt of the laws of civilized nations, has recently been committed here, by the commanders of his Britannic majesty's ships *Plantaganet*, *Rota* and *Carnation*, against the American private armed brig *General Armstrong*, Sam. C. Reid, commander, but I have great satisfaction in being able to add, that this occurrence terminated in one of the most brilliant actions on the part of captain Reid, his brave officers and crew, that can be found on naval record.

The American brig came to anchor in this port in the afternoon of the 26th of September, and at sun-set of the same day, the above named ships suddenly appeared in these roads; it being nearly calm in the port, was rather doubtful if the privateer could escape if she got under way, and relying on the justice and good faith of the British captains, it was deemed most prudent to remain at anchor. A little after dusk captain Reid, seeing some suspicious movements on the part of the British, began to warp his vessel close under the guns of the castle, and while doing so, he was at about eight o'clock P. M. approached by four boats from the ships filled with armed men. After hailing them repeatedly, and warning them to keep off, he ordered his men to fire on them and killed and wounded several men. The boats returned the fire and killed one man and wounded the first Lieut. of the privateer, and returned to their ships, and, as it was now light moonlight, it was plainly perceived from the brig as well as from the shore, that a formidable attack was premeditating. Soon after midnight, twelve or more large boats crowded with men from the ships and armed with carronades, swivels, and blunderbusses, small arms, &c. attacked the brig; a severe contest ensued which lasted about forty minutes, and ended in the total defeat and partial destruction of the boats, with a most unparalled carnage on the part of the British. It is estimated by good judges that near 400 men were in the boats when the attack commenced, and no doubt exists in the mind of the numerous spectators of the scene that more than half of them were killed or wounded; several boats were destroyed; two of them remained alongside of the brig literally loaded with their own dead. From these two boats only 17 reached the shore alive; most of them were severely wounded. The whole of the following day the British were occupied in burying their dead; among them were two lieutenants and one midshipman of the *Rota*—the first lieutenant of the *Plantagenet*, it is said, cannot survive his wounds, and many of the seamen who reached their ships were mortally wounded, and have been dying daily. The British, mortified at this signal and unexpected defeat, endeavor to conceal the extent of the loss; they admit however that they lost in killed and who have died since the engagement, upwards of 120 of the flower of their officers and men. The captain of the *Rota* told me he lost seventy men from his ship. Two days after this affair took place the British sloops of war *Thais* and *Calypso* came into port, when capt. Lloyd immediately took them into requisition to carry home the wounded officers and seamen—they have sailed for England, one on the 2d and the other on the 4th instant, each carried twenty-five badly wounded. Those who were slightly wounded, to the number, as I am informed, of about thirty, remained on board their respective ships, and sailed last evening for Jamaica. Strict orders were given that the sloops of war should take no letters whatever to England, and those orders were rigidly adhered to.

In face of the testimony of all Fayal and a number of respectable strangers who happened to be in this place at the moment, the British commander endeavors to throw the odium of this transaction on the American captain, Reid, alledging that he sent boats merely to reconnoitre the brig, and without any hostile intention; the pilot of the port did inform them of the privateer the moment they entered the port. To reconnoitre an enemy's vessel in a friendly port, at night, with four boats, carrying by the best accounts 120 men, is certainly a strange proceeding! The fact is, they expected as the brig was warping in, that the Americans would not be prepared to receive them, and they had hopes of carrying her by a "coup de main." If any thing could add to the baseness of this transaction on the part of the British commander, it is want of candor openly and boldly to avow the facts. In vain can he expect by such subterfuge to shield himself from the indignation of the world, and the merited resentment of his own government and nation for thus trampling on the sovereignty of their most ancient and faithful ally, and for the wanton sacrifice of British lives.

On the part of the Americans the loss was comparatively nothing, two killed and seven slightly wounded; of the slain, we have to lament the loss of the second lieutenant Mr. Alexander O. Williams of New York, a brave and meritorious officer.

Among the wounded are Messrs. Worth and Johnson, first and third lieutenants; capt. Reid was thus deprived, early in the action, of the services of all his lieutenants; but his cool and intrepid conduct secured him the victory.

On the morning of the 27th ult. one of the British ships placed herself near the shore and commenced a heavy cannonade on the privateer. Finding further resistance unavailing, capt. Reid ordered her to be abandoned after being partially destroyed, to prevent her falling into the hands of the enemy, who soon after sent their boats and set her on fire.

At nine o'clock in the evening, (soon after the first attack) I applied to the governor requesting his excellency to protect the privateer either by force or by such remonstrance to the commander of the squadron as would cause him to desist from any further attempt. The governor indignant at what had passed, but feeling himself totally unable with the slender means he possessed, to resist such a force, took the part of remonstrating, which he did in forcible but respectful terms. His letter to captain Lloyd had no other effect than to produce a menacing reply insulting in the highest degree. Nothing can exceed the indignation of the public authorities, as well as all ranks and description of persons here, at this unprovoked enormity. Such was the rage of the British to destroy this vessel, that no regard was paid to the safety of the town: some of the inhabitants were wounded and a number of the houses were much damaged. The strongest representations on this subject are prepared by the governor for his court.

Since this affair, the commander, Lloyd, threatened to send on shore an armed force and arrest the privateer's crew, saying there were many Englishmen among them, and our poor fellows afraid of his vengeance have fled to the mountains several times and have been harassed extremely. At length captain Lloyd fearful of losing more men if he put his threats in execution, adopted this stratagem; he addressed an official letter to the governor, stating that in the American crew were two men who deserted from his squadron in America, and as they were guilty of high treason, he required them to be found and given up. Accordingly a force was sent into the country, and the American seamen were arrested and brought to town, and as they could not designate the said pretended deserters, all the seamen here passed an examination of the British officers, but no such persons were to be found among them. I was requested by the governor and British consul to attend this humiliating examination, as was also captain Reid; but we declined to sanction by our presence any such proceedings.

Captain Reid has protested against the British commanders of the squadron for the unwarrantable destruction of his vessel in a neutral and friendly port, as also against the government of Portugal for their inability to protect him.

No doubt this government will feel themselves bound to make ample indemnification to the owners, officers and crew of this vessel, for the great loss they have severally sustained.

I shall as early as possible transmit a statement of this transaction to our minister at Rio Janeiro for his government.

I have the honor to be,

With great respect, sir,

Your most obedient servant,

JOHN B. DARNEY.

*To the Secretary of State of U. S.
Washington.*

Fayal, 4th October 1814.

With infinite regret I am constrained to say it has eventually fallen to my lot to state to you the loss and total destruction of the private armed brig General Armstrong, late under my command.

We sailed from Sandy Hook on the evening of the 9th ult. and about midnight fell in close aboard of a razee and ship of the line. They pursued till next noon, when they thought proper to give over chase. On the 11th, after a nine hours chase, boarded the private armed Schooner Perry, John Colman, 6 days from Philadelphia; had thrown over all his guns. On the following day fell in with an enemy's gun brig; exchanged a few shots with him, and left him. On the 24th, boarded a Spanish brig and schooner, and a Portuguese

ship, all from the Havanna. On the 26th following, came ~~to~~ in Fayal Roads, for the purpose of filling water; called on the American consul, who very politely ordered our water immediately sent off, it being our intention to proceed to sea early the next day. At 5 P. M. I went on board, the consul and some other gentlemen in company. I asked some questions concerning enemy's cruisers, and was told there had been none at these islands for several weeks; when about dusk, while we were conversing, the British brig *Carnation* suddenly hove in sight close under the N. E. head of the harbour, within gun shot when first discovered.

The idea of getting under way was instantly suggested; but finding the enemy's brig had the advantage of a breeze, and but little wind with us, it was thought doubtful if we should be able to get to sea without hazarding an action. I questioned the consul to know if in his opinion the enemy would regard the neutrality of the port? He gave me to understand I might make myself perfectly easy, assuring me at the same time they would never molest us while at anchor. But no sooner did the enemy's brig understand from the pilot-boat who we were, when she immediately hauled close in and let go her anchor within pistol shot of us. At the same moment the *Plantagenet* and frigate *Rota*, hove in sight to whom the *Carnation* instantly made signal, and a constant interchange took place for some time. The result was, the *Carnation* proceeded to throw out all her boats; despatched one on board the commodore, and appeared otherwise to be making unusual exertions. From these circumstances I began to suspect their real intentions. The moon was near its full, which enabled us to observe them very minutely; and I now determined to haul in nearer the shore. Accordingly, after clearing for action, we got under way, and began to sweep in. The moment this was observed by the enemy's brig, she instantly cut her cable, made sail, and despatched four boats in pursuit of us. Being now about 8 P. M. as soon as we saw the boats approaching, we let go our anchor, got springs on our cable, and prepared to receive them. I hailed them repeatedly as they drew near, but they felt no inclination to reply. Sure of their game, they only pulled up with the greater speed. I observed the boats were well manned, and apparently as well armed; and as soon as they cleverly got alongside, we opened our fire, which was as soon returned; but meeting with rather a warmer reception than they had probably been aware of, they very soon cried for quarters and hauled off. In this skirmish I had one man killed and my first lieutenant wounded. The enemy's loss must have been upwards of twenty killed and wounded.

They had now repaired to their ships to prepare for a more formidable attack. We, in the interim, having taken the hint, prepared to haul close in to the beach, where we moored head and stern within half pistol shot of the castle. This done, we again prepared in the best possible manner for their second reception. About 9 P. M. we observed the enemy's brig towing in a large fleet of boats. They

soon after left the brig and took their station in three divisions, under covert of a small reef of rocks, within about musket shot of us. Here they continued manœuvring for some time, the brig still keeping under way to act with the boats, should we at any time attempt our escape.

The shores were lined with the inhabitants, waiting the expected attack; and from the brightness of the moon, they had a most favorable view of the scene. The governor, with most of the first people of the place, stood by and saw the whole affair.

At length, about midnight, we observed the boats in motion, (our crew having laid at their quarters during the whole of this interval.) They came on in one direct line, keeping in close order; and we plainly counted twelve boats. As soon as they came within proper distance we opened our fire, which was warmly returned from the enemy's carronades and small arms. The discharge from our Long Tom rather staggered them; but soon reconnoitering, they gave three cheers, and came on most spiritedly. In a moment they succeeded in gaining our bow and starboard quarter, and the word was *Board*. Our great guns now becoming useless, we attacked them sword in hand, together with our pikes, pistols, and musketry, from which our lads poured on them a most destructive fire. The enemy made frequent and repeated attempts to gain our decks, but were repulsed at all times, and in all points, with the greatest slaughter.—About the middle of the action I received intelligence of the death of my second lieutenant; and soon after of the third lieutenant being badly wounded. From this and other causes, I found our fire had much slackened on the forecastle; and, fearful of the event, I instantly rallied the whole of our after division, who had been bravely defending and now had succeeded in beating the boats off the quarters. They gave a shout, rushed forward, opened a fresh fire, and soon after decided the conflict, which terminated in the total defeat of the enemy, and the loss of many of their boats; two of which, belonging to the *Rota*, we took possession of, literally loaded with their own dead. Seventeen only escaped from them both, who had swam to the shore. In another boat under our quarter, commanded by one of the lieutenants of the *Plantagenet*, all were killed saving four. This I have from the lieutenant himself, who further told me that he jumped over board to save his own life.

The duration of this action was about forty minutes. Our decks were now found in much confusion, our Long Tom dismounted, and several of our carronades broken, many of our crew having left the vessel, and others disabled. Under these circumstances, however, we succeeded in getting Long Tom in his birth and the decks cleared in some sort for fresh action, should the enemy attack us again before daylight. About 11 A.M. I received a message from the American consul, requesting to see me on shore, when he informed me the governor had sent a note to captain Lloyd, begging him to desist from further hostilities. To which captain Lloyd sent for an-

swer, that he was now determined to have the privateer at the risk of knocking down the whole town; and that if the governor suffered the Americans to injure the privateer in any manner, he should consider the place an enemy's port and treat it accordingly. Finding this to be the case, I considered all hopes of saving our vessel to be at an end. I therefore went on board, and ordered all our wounded and dead to be taken on shore, and the crew to save their effects as fast as possible. Soon after this it became daylight, when the enemy's brig stood close in, and commenced a heavy fire on us with all her force. After several broadsides she hauled off, having received a shot in her hull, her rigging much cut, and her foretopmast wounded; (of this I was informed by the British consul.) She soon after came in again, and anchored close to the privateer. I then ordered the *Armstrong* to be scuttled, to prevent the enemy from getting her off. She was soon after boarded by the enemy's boats, and set on fire, which soon completed her destruction.

They have destroyed a number of houses in the town and wounded some of the inhabitants.

By what I have been able to learn from the British consul and officers of the fleet, it appears there were about 400 officers and men in the last attack by the boats, of which 120 were killed and 130 wounded. Captain Lloyd, I am told by the British consul is badly wounded in the leg; a jury of surgeons had been held, who gave as their opinion that amputation would be necessary to insure his life. 'Tis said, however, that the wound was occasioned by an *Ox treading on him*. The fleet has remained here about a week, during which they have been principally employed in burying their dead, and taking care of their wounded.

Three days after the action they were joined by the ship *Thais* and brig *Calypso*, (two sloops of war) who were immediately taken into requisition by captain Lloyd, to take home the wounded men. The *Calypso* sailed for England with part of the wounded, on the 2d inst. among whom was the first lieutenant of the *Plantagenet*. The *Thais* sails this evening with the remainder. Captain Lloyd's fleet sailed to-day, supposed for the West Indies.

The loss on our part, I am happy to say is comparatively trifling; two killed and seven wounded. With regard to my officers in general I feel the greatest satisfaction in saying they one and all fought with the most determined bravery, and to whom I feel highly indebted for their officerlike conduct during the short period we were together; their exertions and bravery deserved a better fate.

I here insert for your inspection, a list of the killed and wounded.

KILLED.

Mr. Alexander O. Williams, second lieutenant, by a musket ball in the forehead, died instantly; Burton Lloyd, seaman, do. through the heart, do.

WOUNDED.

Frederick A. Worth, first lieutenant, in the right side,
Robert Johnson, third do. left knee,
Basilla Hammond, quarter master, left arm,
John Piner, seamen, knee,
William Castle, do. arm,
Nicholas Scalsan, do. arm and leg,
John Harrison, do. hands and face, by the explosion of a gun.

It gives me much pleasure to announce to you that our wounded are all in a fair way of recovery, through the unremitted care and attention of our worthy surgeon.

Mr. Dabney, our consul, is a gentleman possessing every feeling of humanity, and to whom the utmost gratitude is due from us for his great care of the sick and wounded, and his polite attention to my officers and myself:

Mr. Williams was a most deserving and promising officer. His country, in him, has lost one of its brightest ornaments; and his death must be sadly lamented by all who knew his worth.

Accompanied with this you will find a copy of my protest, together with copies of letters written by Mr. Dabney to the governor of Fayal, our minister at Rio Janeiro, and our Secretary of State.— These letters will develop more fully the circumstances of this unfortunate affair.

We expect to sail to-morrow in a Portuguese brig for Amelia Island, who takes the whole of our crew; till when, I remain gentlemen, your very obedient humble servant,

SAMUEL C. REID.



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